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EMPATHY DEVELOPMENT - INSIGHTS FROM EARLY YEARS. INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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In recent years empathy has become an increasingly important topic for research in different, yet related, disciplines. Perhaps one of the strongest motivations that support this scientific attempt has to do with the stipulated role that empathy plays in the manifestation of altruistic behaviors, which ultimately play to the promotion and survival of the species.

It is almost generally agreed that we say someone is manifesting empathy when, by perceiving or merely imagining the emotional state or condition of another person, he or she comes to experience a similar affective state (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991; de Waal, 2008), while he or she has some minimal awareness that the other is the source of this affective state (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Empirical evidence points to the second year of life as the age when more mature-like empathic concern emerges (Knafo, Zahn-Waxler, Van Hulle, Robinson, & Rhee, 2008; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992). Moreover, it seems that some individuals are more inclined to respond empathically than others and that this disposition towards empathy tends to be stable throughout the lifespan (Knafo et al., 2008; van der Mark, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2002; Volbrecht, Lamery-Chalfant, Aksan, Zahn-Waxler, & Goldsmith, 2007).

But how do these more mature-like empathic responses emerge in toddlerhood, and what are their precursors? The most common heuristic hypothesis is that from birth, infants have the ability to contagiously share the emotions

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perceived in other social agents around them. Later on, as a function of the development of regulation and of the sense of self, this ability develops into more other-oriented empathic concerns (Hoffman, 2000; but also see Decety & Jackson, 2004; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992).

While there is empirical evidence that points to infants being able to emotionally resonate to the affective states of others, exactly how homogeneous this class of behaviors is, is still, to an important degree, vague. Related to this, there is still not much consensus about the neuropsychological mechanisms that allow in infancy the link between detecting emotional expressions in others and experiencing a similar emotion oneself. Also, there is still a matter of debate as to what are the developmental timelines during the early years of life for these factors.

Most of the research concerning those factors that are responsible for empathy development in infancy and toddlerhood has been primarily focused on how regulatory abilities modulate affect sharing reactions, and how this is linked with the manifestation of prosocial development. Less is known about the role of self-other differentiation, despite its hypothesized importance. Current evidence is scarce and weak (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992) and it is most likely that this situation is related to our understanding of the development of the sense of self. Several theoretical attempts have concluded by emphasizing how multi-faceted and complex this concept is (see for example Gergely, 2002; Rochat, 1995), which raises the natural question of which one of these multiple aspects is relevantly linked to the emergence of empathy.

This special issue is a collection of theoretical and empirical papers that address different aspects of early empathy development. By revising the existent literature and by providing empirical evidence, the authors try to answer questions and, most importantly, formulate or emphasize unanswered ones in an attempt to better understand how empathy develops within the first years of life. The different theoretical backgrounds that each of them brings to the debate is one reason to consider that the matter is approached in its complexity, although it is not by far exhaustive.

Empathy impairments are reported as being specific to several pathologies like autism, antisocial personality disorder, alexithymia, schizophrenia, or usual sub-clinical behavioral patterns characterized by atypical manifestation of morality (see for example Blair, 1999; Carrasco, Barker, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2006; Decety & Moriguchi, 2007; Iacoboni & Dapretto, 2006; Shamay-Tsoory, Shur, Harari, & Levkovitz, 2007; Yirmiya, Sigman, Kasari, & Mundy, 1992), for most of which early detection and intervention is invaluable. A better understanding of the mechanisms that underlie early empathy development could therefore have implications in advancing our understanding of the processes associated to these pathologies.

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